

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 032 078

LI 001 561

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A Report on New Haven's Library Neighborhood Centers.

New Haven Free Public Library, Conn.

Pub Date 12 Jun 69

Note-11p.; Related documents are LI 001 562 and LI 001 563.

EDRS Price MF-\$0.25 HC-\$0.65

Descriptors-*Community Involvement, Disadvantaged Groups, Financial Support, Inner City, Interagency Planning, *Library Programs, *Library Services, *Neighborhood Centers, *Public Libraries

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A Report on New Haven's
Library Neighborhood Centers

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The library center is planned with the premise that what people probably want from an organized information system is answers to their questions for daily living. But since many people, particularly those of limited education, do not perceive the library as a meaningful service agency in practical everyday terms, it is necessary to establish a link or bridge and a basis of understanding and confidence, before the information system can be made to work in their behalf.

With this idea in mind, the library center maintains an active program designed to capture the interest and participation of persons in the community who have not been accustomed to the use of books and other printed materials. Elements of the center program include an attractive setting and a relaxed atmosphere; an emphasis on serving as a people's information center; planned communication with individuals and neighborhood groups; and both scheduled and opportunistic creative and learning activities.

1. Some Facts about the Centers

Four of New Haven's eight branches are designated as library neighborhood centers.

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Two centers have staffs of six including, usually, three librarians or program workers; two program assistants, and a library assistant for the clerical work. Two centers have staffs of four. Program workers are librarians, or college graduates with demonstrated ability to relate books and materials to individual needs and interests or to facilitate communication and participation. Program assistants are usually neighborhood residents, sometimes with a high-school diploma, but chiefly with an interest in people and their needs and the ability to communicate and to relate. No staff are social workers, in the conventional sense.

2. Programs and Activities

As to programs and activities, it is important to see them in perspective. In-library programs are not designed as crowd-pullers to get people into the

library so that they can be persuaded to read our books. Nor are the outreach activities, the door-to-door work, and the participation in meetings planned with that motive in mind. They have two purposes: they are designed as a bridge between the individual and the resources of the library in that they prepare a base for understanding and communication. And they provide opportunities for individual creative participation and communication, as a means for enhancing self-awareness.

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The strength of the center program is in the flexibility and responsiveness to change. The purposes are to help residents identify their needs and interests and to advance themselves. The centers are important as meeting-places for organization work by neighborhood residents, and staff can often assist in this, at the beginning stages in particular, by being available and approachable.

One may ask: what activities are most successful? I suppose the answer is: whatever can be done well, that is in response to a felt need. But the needs run the whole gamut. A New Haven community leader in response to the question of needs of inner-city kids: "They need exposure to everything." So whatever you do, if it is done with feeling and is credible, is pretty apt to work.

Programs and activities are both regularly scheduled and intermittent. There are things for the individual to do and things for the group. The center

is used as a setting for other similarly oriented agencies, such as the Basic Education program. The staff thinks up what it can do well, and feel comfortable about and be successful at, within the design of the center. People suggest what they'd like to do. Surefire among children, are activities that involve participation and creativity: puppet clubs, reading aloud, knitting clubs; boys' clubs, little boys' clubs; ditto for girls. There may be informal tutoring, or help with reading, or other school work.

3. Some Other Elements of the Centers Program

As to staff, this is critical. A variety of skills, experience, and training is required. First requirement: interest in and proven ability to respond to people. Enough literacy to lead and help. Enough imagination to create and to encourage it in others. Enough energy and stamina to stand the gaff. Optimism; patience; kindness. Above all a belief in the communication of ideas, inspiration.

Staff should be dedicated, concerned; but friendly and not over-intense. In brief, perfect jewels! Indigenous personnel perform the same duties in the Centers as the librarian - program workers, with some guidance and direction. The line between professional and non-professional is blurred, and probably as far as the client is concerned, is non-existent.

Staff is important in relation to work in the community. It is desirable to have at least one staff member who lives in and is identified with the community in which the center is located. This allows for immediate input and feedback, and for the establishment of rapport more easily. It is often useful if one neighborhood resident speaks Spanish. However, it is vital that the staff have the other required skills and qualifications, in addition to being of the community. The neighborhood resident employee should not be "an exhibit A" but must be credible and competent.

Staff from outside the area can identify with the area by walking to schools when they make their class visits, and by shopping and lunching in the neighborhood. They will also go out to community meetings, and take part in them.

Staff members need to be flexible and versatile, having special interests in and talents for art, creative writing, dance, drama, or similar areas of expression. They should have something to contribute. They must be energetically equipped to perform the usual branch library functions as well as the center-type activities.

"In addition to a well-organized offering of books and group programs, the library staff in a center must express understanding and acceptance of community problems and attitudes, actually become involved in those persons and problems they meet and avoid all signs of disinterest, rejection, fear or feelings of superiority. In addition to being experts at dealing with books, staff must become expert in dealing with people, especially poor people."

This comment on library center staff needs was made by a New Haven neighborhood legal rights association which is engaged in training neighborhood workers to help people learn how to help themselves. The Association was commissioned by the Library early in 1969 to carry on a two-month training and orientation session for 14 of the 18 library centers staff.

At the heart of this program is the quality of the setting. It must be a place where interesting, exciting, mind-stretching things are happening. This has to be in the air. A person has to feel welcome. He has to be able to feel when he walks in that this is a good place to be. The place must be inviting, accessible, well-appointed if not luxuriously furnished. It must be convenient to get to and easy to get into.

A store-front type of space is desirable but one of our centers is in a 1920 Carnegie-vintage building on a side street in the worst possible location. The neighborhood has overcome that obstacle because the atmosphere inside is right. There are white tables and pink chairs, and the staff is agreeable and helpful. There is a general air of welcome.

There must be an out-reach point of view: this means going out, being where people are, responsive, interested and interesting. Staff does go into the streets and into homes and talk with the people. They do not ask: "What can the library do for you?" Or, "Why don't you come and read our books?" They get acquainted. They listen. They try to understand. Once the hoped for understanding and trust has been built, a person will accept a friendly hand. But people generally don't want to "be helped" and they don't relish strangers prying into their business or lives. Attitude is vitally important. And then staff have to be prepared to deliver. There is no use in opening up if one can't respond.

4. The User Point of View

To what kind of problems is a library center worker apt to be called upon to respond? Here are six key problem areas which concern many people in the communities served by the Library Centers. The specific problems are extremely varied; but the need for information, recommendations, and encouragement is immense.

Sometimes the need is for help in linking up with an agency in the first place. Very often the problem concerns misapprehensions, confusion, or unfavorable decisions after a person has already contacted an agency. In both cases, with background information, interest, and general skill in dealing with

bureaucratics, Library Centers Staff can clarify facts, allay fears, and help persons reverse past decisions.

Library Centers staff must continually review and up-date information. Efforts to secure and organize appropriate phone listings and pamphlet materials are also required.

For those in Financial Need:

State Welfare	Veteran's Benefits	Union Benefits
City Welfare	Unemployment Compensation	Better Jobs
Title 19	Public Housing	Training Program
City	Cheaper Rent	for better jobs
Medical Aid Program	Budgeting Aid	Fish
Social Security	Bankruptcy	Red Cross
Food Stamps	Family Relations	Goodwill
DLRA*		Volunteer effort to
		raise food or furniture

For those with Consumer Problems:

Credit Union	Employer if Attachments	Merchants
Credit Adjustor	Sheriff if Garnishment	Lawyer
Lawyer for Bankruptcy		DLRA

For Tenants:

DNI*	Realtors	Public Housing
Landlord	Commission on Equal	Fire Department
Redevelopment	Opportunities*	
	Health Department	

For Persons accused or Convicted of a Crime:

Legal Assistance	Public Defender	Officials of Deten-
Association	Private Attorney	tion Center
Lawyer Referral	No-Bail Program	Parole
Legal Aid	Bondsman	Probation
	Prosecutor	Prisons

For Persons with Medical Problems, including Alcoholism and Drug Addiction:

Hill Health Center	Yale New Haven Hospital
Scranton Health Project	St. Raphael's Hospital
Patient Assistant at Yale-New	Community Relations Workers
Haven Hospital	at Yale-New Haven Hospital
Connecticut Mental Health Center	Medical Assistance

*Local New Haven agencies.

NARCO
Methadone Maintenance Program

Union of Indigent People
State Alcoholic and Drug Dependence
Unit

For persons seeking Higher Education:

Adult Basic Education
Quinnipiac College
South Center Community College
Yale New Haven Personnel

New Haven College
Yale Transitional Year Program
National Defense Loans
South Connecticut College

An information and referral system which is geared to respond to practical and immediate concerns such as these is considerably different than the belletristic, National Library Week, Be-All-You-Can-Be -Read kind of operation. Books and the conventional library program are an integral part of the service, but often not at the outset for many persons who are in more urgent need of other services.

5. Some Unsolved Problems, General Comments, and Lessons Learned.

Apathy and ignorance. One can not go into this kind of work with the romantic notion that he will be received with great enthusiasm and his efforts greeted most warmly because he has condescended to do something for the people. It will not be that way. He will at best be dealing with a minority. Anti-intellectualism and apathy are not the exclusive property of the affluent, and not all black men and women are eagerly awaiting release from the bondage of ignorance.

Library education. It seems clear that if there are to be effective people-oriented libraries there will have to be people-oriented librarians. These will be in addition to the cataloger, reference librarian, book selector and readers' advisor. There will need to be separate but complementary functions. Both kinds of functions are equally important, but it seems doubtful that we can do the jobs with one general purpose, all-inclusive type of librarian.

Different skills and attitudes are required. The Library Center worker will need training in identifying and responding to human needs. He will need to be able to work with groups.

The library career structures should provide the means for people from the neighborhoods to move in at the level at which they are, and move up into positions of service and responsibility, as Pearl and Reissman have suggested for other occupations.

Tension. The traditional book-oriented library function, and the people-directed, activities and program-oriented center type of operation work to create a certain tension which if understood maintains a degree of vitality that has a positive and beneficial effect, lending purpose and a sense of meaning to staff efforts. This tension can also induce staff discomfort, which must be recognized and dealt with. Under adequate guidance and perceptive leadership, the staff of a center can become a group, working as a unit in the common purpose.

Measurement and evaluation. Both statistics and narrative are employed. Monthly reports cover such quantitative items as a number of individuals participating. For the Community Action Program we are required to report sex of the participants; whether black, white or Puerto Rican; and whether in poverty according to OEO standards. We also show the attendance at special events, and the other usual program statistics such as visits to schools, and class visits to the library.

Last year 32,000 inner-city residents took part in one or more programs or activities in the three library neighborhood centers that were then operating. Nearly 400 meetings by neighborhood groups were held in these centers. In addition to this, a reasonable number of books were borrowed, reference questions were answered, browsers browsed, and students did their homework.

The statistical report is important. It is a measure of some significance. But more important is the less tangible result, of the way that people are enabled to help themselves, and the feeling that they have about the library center. Most people do not come easily to libraries, and they often do not approach their problems in a rational manner. This is a great truth; about of the same order as the striking discovery that there is a direct correlation between the years of education that a person has and his use of the library, which is a point made in various studies of library usage. One example is the most recent study of the Baltimore library by Dr. Lowell Martin. So what else is new? What else would one expect? The point, however, is that people with fewer years of schooling are still trying to live in the complex society that the college graduate lives in, and are faced with many of the same problems of adjustment, and even survival. The only difference is that the college graduate knows that books and other printed materials can be of some use to him.

The multi-agency approach. One of the key elements in the New Haven program has been the fact that the Community Action Program, locally known as Community Progress, Inc., went into the human renewal effort even before the federal activity began under the Office of Economic Opportunity. The New Haven climate was one of experimentation and innovation. New ways of dealing with human needs and problems were sought and tried. The library became an integral part of that effort. A momentum was built up and risks were taken; that is, we went ahead on faith; the faith that the central idea was a good one, even though we did not always know exactly where we were going to come out. But, the multi-agency approach meant that we were not alone; that we were able to benefit from the skills and resources of others, and that we in turn could sometimes take a catalytic role in the deliberations and planning of their programs. This

is critical, and a role that the public library could serve to a much greater extent than it does, if it had the human resources and skills, because it cuts across all lines and reaches into all segments of society. Other people-helping agencies have definite limits, by function, type of person, age level, geographic area, or what not. The individual or family in need of advice on how to make it in the modern, complex, urban setting can scarcely find his way around if he is literate and aggressive. If he is semi-literate and tending to be fearful, it is a maze, indeed.

The role of the public library as inter-disciplinary mediator among the array of social agencies and organizations is a new frontier. It was touched on only slightly in the publication "Neighborhood Library Services and Centers" by one of the critics and commentators, Professor Kahn, author of the Columbia study "Neighborhood Information Centers." It is an area that we have not developed in New Haven, for lack of time and know-how.

In this report I have tried to present some of the highlights of the library neighborhood centers program. When we began in 1963 to think about this idea, we had no idea that it would turn out as it has. We did not even know what to call it. Finally, as the time for opening the first one came closer and we had to settle on something, we called it the Library Neighborhood Center, even though we thought it was too long and cumbersome. But the two-foot letters on the front of the Center's buildings read "Public Library" and that's what they are, with a difference that is relevant, we hope, to the needs of today. The Library Center is, we think, one of the centers of its community, with its own style and unique contribution.

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City Librarian
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June 12, 1969

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Different skills and attitudes are required. The Library Center worker will need training in identifying and responding to human needs. He will need to be able to work with groups.

The library career structures should provide the means for people from the neighborhoods to move in at the level at which they are, and move up into positions of service and responsibility, as Pearl and Reissman have suggested for other occupations.

Tension. The traditional book-oriented library function, and the people-directed, activities and program-oriented center type of operation work to create a certain tension which if understood maintains a degree of vitality that has a positive and beneficial effect, lending purpose and a sense of meaning to staff efforts. This tension can also induce staff discomfort, which must be recognized and dealt with. Under adequate guidance and perceptive leadership, the staff of a center can become a group, working as a unit in the common purpose.

Measurement and evaluation. Both statistics and narrative are employed. Monthly reports cover such quantitative items as a number of individuals participating. For the Community Action Program we are required to report sex of the participants; whether black, white or Puerto Rican; and whether in poverty according to OEO standards. We also show the attendance at special events, and the other usual program statistics such as visits to schools, and class visits to the library.

Last year 32,000 inner-city residents took part in one or more programs or activities in the three library neighborhood centers that were then operating. Nearly 400 meetings by neighborhood groups were held in these centers. In addition to this, a reasonable number of books were borrowed, reference questions were answered, browsers browsed, and students did their homework.

The statistical report is important. It is a measure of some significance. But more important is the less tangible result, of the way that people are enabled to help themselves, and the feeling that they have about the library center. Most people do not come easily to libraries, and they often do not approach their problems in a rational manner. This is a great truth; about of the same order as the striking discovery that there is a direct correlation between the years of education that a person has and his use of the library, which is a point made in various studies of library usage. One example is the most recent study of the Baltimore library by Dr. Lowell Martin. So what else is new? What else would one expect? The point, however, is that people with fewer years of schooling are still trying to live in the complex society that the college graduate lives in, and are faced with many of the same problems of adjustment, and even survival. The only difference is that the college graduate knows that books and other printed materials can be of some use to him.

The multi-agency approach. One of the key elements in the New Haven program has been the fact that the Community Action Program, locally known as Community Progress, Inc., went into the human renewal effort even before the federal activity began under the Office of Economic Opportunity. The New Haven climate was one of experimentation and innovation. New ways of dealing with human needs and problems were sought and tried. The library became an integral part of that effort. A momentum was built up and risks were taken; that is, we went ahead on faith; the faith that the central idea was a good one, even though we did not always know exactly where we were going to come out. But, the multi-agency approach meant that we were not alone; that we were able to benefit from the skills and resources of others, and that we in turn could sometimes take a catalytic role in the deliberations and planning of their programs. This

is critical, and a role that the public library could serve to a much greater extent than it does, if it had the human resources and skills, because it cuts across all lines and reaches into all segments of society. Other people-helping agencies have definite limits, by function, type of person, age level, geographic area, or what not. The individual or family in need of advice on how to make it in the modern, complex, urban setting can scarcely find his way around if he is literate and aggressive. If he is semi-literate and tending to be fearful, it is a maze, indeed.

The role of the public library as inter-disciplinary mediator among the array of social agencies and organizations is a new frontier. It was touched on only slightly in the publication "Neighborhood Library Services and Centers" by one of the critics and commentators, Professor Kahn, author of the Columbia study "Neighborhood Information Centers." It is an area that we have not developed in New Haven, for lack of time and know-how.

In this report I have tried to present some of the highlights of the library neighborhood centers program. When we began in 1963 to think about this idea, we had no idea that it would turn out as it has. We did not even know what to call it. Finally, as the time for opening the first one came closer and we had to settle on something, we called it the Library Neighborhood Center, even though we thought it was too long and cumbersome. But the two-foot letters on the front of the Center's buildings read "Public Library" and that's what they are, with a difference that is relevant, we hope, to the needs of today. The Library Center is, we think, one of the centers of its community, with its own style and unique contribution.

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June 12, 1969